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ABSTRACT

For any student, the first semester of graduate school is the most traumatic experience in his or her career as a graduate student. Fortunately, there are some things that can be done to make the transition for these students easier. Getting undergraduate students involved in the classrooms in positions of pedagogical responsibility is the most effective thing that can be done to prepare them for success in graduate school. These teaching and tutoring experiences can open doors. For one professor, his experience as a speech communication major as an undergraduate and the mentoring relationships available to him got him involved in tutoring and teaching at the undergraduate level. Grading speeches alongside an instructor (mentor), going over evaluations and comparing them with his, and being encouraged to write and deliver lectures in class all serve to make the classroom and the teaching environment a more comfortable place for a graduate student teaching assistant. When graduate students gain agency over their education, with strength in writing, leadership, and teaching, then their approach to graduate school changes--and that change will reverberate up through the academic hierarchy. (CR)

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The Value of the Undergraduate Teaching/Tutoring Experience
For Graduate School Success:
A Personal Narrative

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Paper Abstract

The following is a "reflection" on how best we can prepare undergraduates for the transition to graduate school. Specifically, I argue for the value of the undergraduate teaching and tutoring experience. Getting undergraduate students involved in the classrooms in positions of pedagogic responsibility is the strongest thing we can do in preparing them for success in graduate school.

I remember starting my first semester as an M.A. student at the California State University, Fresno, during the Spring of 1990. I had graduated a few weeks earlier with my B.A. in Speech Communication from Humboldt State University. There were six of us in the graduate program at Fresno, and at least three of us were beginning that very semester. Like all beginning graduate students, we were faced with the demands of balancing a full load of classes with the brand new experience of teaching. Like all beginning graduate students, we were immensely challenged by the task we had before us.

For any student, the first semester of graduate school, as I am sure that you all will recall, is the most traumatic experience in the career of a graduate student. I do not think that anything else in graduate school compares with the intensity and trauma of that first semester and that first year. Even the doctoral qualifying examinations, with all the challenges that they entail, do not match the insecurity that one feels, and its incipient terror, when a student ponders for nine months whether or not he or she is "graduate school material." It is an insecurity that plagues new students, and one that, if it is not addressed properly, can affect their subsequent perceptions of themselves and of their careers. For myself, the other five students in the program, and for all the other first year M.A. students I would see as I moved from Fresno to the University of California at Davis, to Purdue University, and finally to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (where I have the opportunity to teach M.A. students and council them),

these fears of alienation and failure are very real and they become magnified by the extreme work load of that first year. At Purdue, for instance, new M.A. students teach three classes their first semester. Now, it is hard enough to make the transition from an undergraduate program to graduate school (and in a good M.A. program, the two should be as different as night and day); to add to that the burden and the responsibility of teaching (and excessive teaching) can be unbearable as well as counter-productive to intellectual growth. In fact, I have seen many good students turned off from doctoral studies because of the stress and pressures.

Fortunately, there are some things that we can do to make the transition for these students easier, and I think we should make the effort to do this, for both moral and professional reasons. Doing so will not only make the graduate school experience more satisfying to our students, but in making it satisfying, we would also be making it meaningful, and thus we would produce more quality scholars and teachers. That is what we are all about as disciplinary representatives at our respective universities: it is about producing good scholars and teachers, and this demand weighs on us more heavily than it ever did in the past. Ultimately, I think, the things that we can do to improve the graduate school experience will create a "cycle of goodness" (for lack of a better term) that will reverberate through the often negative hierarchy of our departments and our discipline. As things currently stand, the bitterness and frustration that is so often cultivated in the newest arrivals to our field--the M.A.

student--filters up through the ranks as these students become Ph.D. students and professors. In other words, as we cultivate unpleasantness in our new graduate students they learn a negative vocabulary by which they conceptualize graduate school, and this negativity becomes reified as the next generation of teachers reinforces an academic culture that breeds insecurity in our students. Thus, by creating a positive disposition in the minds of our newest graduate students, we are ultimately helping the psychological health of our discipline.

Today I would like to talk to you about the value of the undergraduate teaching and tutoring experience for undergraduate students. I am speaking from personal experience, but I believe that what I have to say applies beyond my experience. Without a doubt, getting undergraduate students involved in the classrooms in positions of pedagogic responsibility is the most effective thing we can do in preparing them for success in graduate school.

When I came to Humboldt State University in the Fall of 1987 as a Freshman, I had no idea that I was going to be in school for nine years and study a field called Speech Communication. In fact, statistically speaking, it is unlikely that I would have chosen Speech Communication as my major, and even less likely, having made that choice, pursued my studies through the doctoral level and beyond as a professor. But I did. And the only reason why I did was because of the experience I had in the major as an undergraduate and, particularly, the mentoring relationships that were made available to me. It is precisely these relationships that got me involved in tutoring and teaching at the

undergraduate level.

These teaching and tutoring experiences opened great doors for me. Specifically, they helped me to imagine myself in the role of being a graduate student and helped me to see that I had the potential to succeed. Nothing is more the enemy of the graduate student than the lack of imagination and the inability to perceive oneself as mastering the skills that graduate students need to master. In this scheme of things, "intelligence" and "brightness" are relatively unimportant. Yes, our field attracts its share of geniuses, but most of us, myself included, are no more intelligent or brighter than any of the people who went to graduate school with us and who, for one reason or another, never made it. What is the difference between them and us? For me, it was imagination and belief in my own potential, and I believe that this is true for most of us as well.

By my junior year at Humboldt, I was attending faculty meetings as an unvoting student representative. This is also an important part of helping students to succeed. I have never seen this anywhere else, but it was an important part of my professional development and I wish to see more students involved with the operation of their departments. It gives them a sense of responsibility, agency, and interest. The attention that students get from the faculty (by-being de-facto members of the faculty) boosts their self-esteem. In addition, the leadership experience they earn in serving as an intermediary between the student body and the faculty is an important experience in

helping students to begin thinking like Speech Communication professionals. That is what we are talking about here-- discipline: Learning how to think, feel, talk, and act in a certain way that is recognized as important by our SCA peers.

It was during one of these faculty meetings that I proposed that the department start a speech tutoring program. We had speech practice rooms already available. I managed to attain some old, but sturdy video taping equipment and a TV monitor. The equipment came from another department: it was sitting in the back of a class somewhere and I noticed that it was not being used--the equipment was gathering dust. I wrote a couple of letters: one to Steven Littlejohn, then chair of the Speech Communication Department, and one to the chair of the other department. The equipment was quickly donated and moved to one of the speech practice rooms. I volunteered my time, as did Theresa Love, and a few other dedicated students of the Student Speech Communication Association (who had been active for a semester or two), and we started tutoring students.

We had a fair amount of people coming through the tutoring program at the time we started, and we kept a detailed log of all our activities. I gave regular reports to the faculty at the weekly faculty meetings. We sent fliers to all the public speaking instructors (but we even did some tutoring in other classes as well). Public speaking instructors did a good job publicizing our program and encouraging their students to participate. With the support of the faculty, the students came. Students who came for help seemed to enjoy the experience and

their speaking skills improved. Then I graduated and left, and that is all I know about the program. I had envisioned that students would get academic credit for serving as tutors and that the faculty would make a systematic effort to incorporate our efforts into a permanent part of the department. As is the case with much student effort, the effects of that effort usually disappear as the student who energized them graduates. The faculty was conscious of this problem. From what I have heard from Jay VerLinden, the student tutoring program has been adopted by the department. Students receive academic credit for being tutors and the tutoring program is an important part of the public speaking classes at Humboldt. For this I am glad. Not many students have the opportunity to give something back to their undergraduate departments.

Relatedly, at this time, I had the opportunity to be an undergraduate teaching assistant for Richard Pinsak. In conjunction with my work in the Student Speech Association and with the tutoring program, I was sent for a semester into the public speaking classroom, along with the instructor, for an internship. Nothing, I mean nothing better prepared me for teaching my own class for the first time in Fresno than that experience that semester with Richard Pinsak. Because of that experience, the tensions I described earlier between a first semester of course work and a first semester of teaching were greatly abated. By being in the classroom with Pinsak, I became more committed to the teaching and to the training that I would experience in later years.

As many of you realize, T.A.'s get zero training, for the most part, before they walk into the classroom, and I am glad that I was an exception to that rule. Some programs make an effort to acclimate the students the week before classes start, and that is a help. Purdue does this, as does UNCG, and the three to four day training sessions are usually helpful. But, by themselves, they are not enough. One place I know, U.C. Davis, actually had an entire class that T.A.s took before they walked into the classroom, and that is a positive experience and useful for the students. However, such opportunity is resource intensive (students received a teaching reduction for the class, but not academic credit) and is thus impractical, considering today's budget and the reluctance to allocate resources toward the bottom of the academic hierarchy. As wonderful as that class was, taught at the time by Karen Williams, it was still "just" a class and could not substitute for the hands-on experience and the growth in maturity that comes from a mentoring relationship between undergraduates and faculty.

Most programs, however, functionally do nothing to prepare new graduate students for their experiences as teachers. For example, at the California State University, Fresno, I showed up on the day I had to report for service and was handed a textbook and a syllabus, and was pointed to the classroom. That was it. This was about five days before classes actually started, and much of the time was spent trying to find a place to live, registering for classes, buying books, and otherwise getting oriented to my new environment. There was a mandatory "teaching

class" that ran parallel with the semester, but it was not comprehensive as was the class that I would later take at Davis. It was merely an opportunity to be pipe-fed instructions as the semester progressed, and did nothing to abate the fears of walking into class on the first day. More importantly, it was of little help in transforming our perceptions of discomfort or in creating our identities and personas as teachers. I remember walking to my public speaking classroom for the first time as the instructor of record, relishing my new and exciting experiences of responsibility. I also remember being nervous and scared, and wanting to be anywhere else in the world. Part of me wanted graduate school without the responsibility of teaching.

Looking back on that experience, however, I also recall the resolve and confidence I felt, knowing that it was not a completely new experience for me. I remember spending the week before class in the library outlining my lectures, and it seemed simply like another thing I had to do, rather than something I had to overcome. Teaching became less of an obstacle and more of an opportunity for growth and development as a scholar. In short, it was a difficult time for me that first semester, but it was not as difficult as it could have been, as it was for others. For the other new students at the time, that first day of class was probably the most terrifying experience they have ever had in their lives. Throughout the semester, their public speaking classes caused them a lot of trauma and pain (one student was hounded out of graduate school by one of his public speaking students). The trauma and the threat of failure was always

there. This trauma and threat is the flip side of all that is laudable about the graduate school experience. I do not mean to draw such a bleak picture here; I only mean to accentuate and focus upon one dimension of graduate school that is often considered unspeakable. Personally, I was spared most of this trauma and pain because of my undergraduate experiences during my junior and senior years. The biggest advantage of this "head start" that I received was that I was able to form good study habits at beginning of my career. I also avoided much of the emotional baggage that many graduate students fumble with for a few years as they try to make sense of their teaching experiences. My good study habits, along with my sense of self-confidence that was bequeathed to me by my mentoring experiences at HSU, put me on the right path early on, directing me toward success.

Success, however, did not come easily, nor should it, as graduate school is supposed to be a challenge. Success in graduate school is never pre-ordained, no matter how much preparation a student has as an undergraduate, and no matter how high a student's GRE scores. Nevertheless, we need to encourage our graduate students all we can, and being an undergraduate T.A. was an instrumental part of my graduate school experience. It was a crucial element in the fact that my first year of graduate school was as positive as it was. The graduate school experience would not have been so positive, at least initially, if I had not sat in the same classroom with Richard Pinsak and graded speeches alongside of him, meeting after class each day to go over my

evaluations and compare them with his. The transition to graduate school would have been much more difficult if I had not been encouraged to write and deliver lectures in class, as I was as a graduating senior. Thus, I was much more comfortable with myself in the classroom than I would have been as a first year graduate student in a teaching environment where my students, in many cases, were older than I and themselves on the verge of graduating.

In talking to you today about graduate student success and ways of improving the undergraduate experience, and in preparing people for the challenges of being professionals in our field, I want to say that I benefited from an additional strength found in the Speech Communication department of HSU. Students teaching students is only part of the equation. What it really comes down to is students teaching themselves how to learn. Two of us graduated from the Speech Communication Department at HSU at the same time and ended up at U.C. Davis together (I transferred from Fresno after one semester). Chris Simmons and I represented the pedagogy of HSU at U.C. Davis. Chris had many of the same experiences I had in that he was personally mentored by members of the faculty (particularly Steven Littlejohn and Karen Foss), he engaged in faculty research, and otherwise spent his time cultivating his graduate school potential. Chris and I joined twelve other new graduate students at Davis, most of whom had gotten their B.A. in that same department. By and large, these people struggled and floundered, and at least 4 of them dropped out of the program. I lost track, but a few others may have

failed to complete their programs as well.

Outside of Chris and myself and perhaps two or three other people, most of the students in our class were not prepared for graduate school. Do not misunderstand me, all of us struggled at Davis, it was a brutal place in those days, probably more brutal than it needed to be. The faculty were mean, the expectations were at the Ph.D. level, and the competition among the students for scant resources and other privileges were fierce. Nevertheless, most of the beginning M.A. students at Davis, as well as at Purdue and, I am finding, unfortunately, at UNCG as well, were astute undergraduate students who were able to work their way through a B.A. program but who never learned why they studied what they did. Most of these students, most of our students in our field, never learn to identify with their chosen profession and discipline at an early age. Certainly, these identifications grow as the years in graduate school pile up, or else people would not graduate at all, and roughly 200 people earn their doctorates a year in our field. But this identification needs to start early and it can start early. The earlier that identification is cultivated, the more our students will see that their education is not a degree, but a lifestyle and a professional commitment. The sooner they make that commitment, the sooner the pain of the graduate school experience becomes transcended to growing pains and their experience of struggle and learning takes place at a higher, more beneficial level.

In short, when undergraduate students gain agency over their

education, and that means strength in writing, leadership, and teaching, then their approach to graduate school changes--and that change will reverberate up through the academic hierarchy. I, for one, have an entirely different approach to what it means to be a professor. As other people also learn to take on this more healthy approach to conceptualizing graduate school and the undergraduate teaching/research/and tutoring experience, I think we will change much of our current disciplinary attitudes--and grow as a discipline for the better.